

Sweden at the crossroads – a weekly news review

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Benny Gustafsson could be a symbol of humanitarian Sweden: a retired headmaster who has dedicated his time and energy into making his small town a centre of support for Kurdish rights. Of course, this was only ever one version of Swedish life, but if the Swedish government is tempted to submit to President Erdoğan's demands in exchange for Turkey lifting their veto on Sweden's NATO membership, it will be a version that is lost for good. Turkey has called for Sweden and Finland to clamp down on Kurdish political activity. As if the ending of seven decades of neutrality was not traumatic enough, Turkey would force the two Nordic countries to give up their souls. In case anyone was in any doubt about this, they need only look at the Turkish press, where Gustafsson is being pilloried as a leading terrorist.

When I met Gustafsson a few years back, I was so impressed by what he had achieved that I wrote an article about it. I was also impressed by the Swedish society that made his activities possible. Now, both Gustafsson and that society are under threat. The Turkish press made sure to include his photograph and email, and he has been receiving hate mail.

Gustafsson told me how his group persuaded local schools to dedicate their annual fundraising to support the rebuilding of a school in Kobanê after the ISIS siege. His town was visited by Nesrin Abdullah, a commander from the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) that had defended Kobanê, and she was presented with a symbolic cheque for the school in front of an audience that

included local politicians, representatives from local organisations, and the local school children.

The YPJ and the male YPG (People's Protection Units) saved northern Syria – and consequently the world – from ISIS. They are now part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which the United States describes as partners, but Turkey brands them and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – the main political party in North and East Syria – as terrorist organisations. Turkey uses this “terrorist” designation to demand the end of all support for the PYD and the YPG/YPJ – and they have marked out Gustafsson as a terrorist leader.

Gustafsson was astonished to learn that the pro-Government daily Sabah had described him as the “PYD’s most important man in Sweden”, who “provides the connection between all associations and structures”. In the Turkish press, donations made for the Kobanê school are being presented as merely a cover for terrorist financing. Gustafsson told the Swedish newspaper, Expressen, “That’s nonsense. I have been active locally in Söderhamn for seven to eight years. We have brought with us all the political parties, the churches and the largest unions. So I am far from an isolated ‘terrorist’... It has only been about humanitarian contributions, no money for weapons or warring parties. For example, what we have done together with the high school students is to build a school in Kobanê. Because the whole town was just a pile of gravel when it was liberated in January 2015. We have received documentation of all our support.” He also told them, “I’m actually a little worried, the Turkish security service MIT has also attacked people abroad”.

Benny Gustafsson stresses that Sweden should not abandon its principles – and he is far from alone. This week, Sweden’s state television, STV, broadcast an interview with the SDF’s commander Mazlum Abdi. Anadolu Agencies headline declared “Sweden’s state TV interviews terror leader”. In May, STV interviewed the PYD’s Salih Muslim. The Turkish news agency portrays both men as in hiding, which is, of course, very far from the case.

NATO claims to be defending freedom and democracy against tyranny, but there is a serious risk that Sweden’s leaders could give up fundamental democratic freedoms in response to Turkey’s blackmail, especially since

NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, appears to be supportive of Turkey's claim that the PYD and the YPG/YPJ are a threat to Turkish security. Stoltenberg likes to point out that Turkey has suffered unparalleled terrorist attacks, and it doesn't seem to bother him that these were actually carried out by ISIS, which has been shown to have benefitted from Turkish support. The Kurdish role in these big attacks was as victims.

Hopes of agreeing to begin NATO membership procedures for Sweden and Finland before next week's NATO summit in Madrid are fast vanishing, and there is good reason to believe that Turkey will hold out for maximum concessions. The trust of other NATO members is already gone, while every prolongation of their veto on Swedish and Finnish membership wins them bargaining points with Russia, who has the power to allow another Turkish invasion into Syria. At the same time, Abdi argued in his television interview that Turkey could "use the NATO applications to pressure the United States and NATO to give the green light to attack our territories". When Turkey is involved, all options aim to make life difficult for the Kurds.

The war on terrorism

There are reports that NATO's Madrid summit will include a session where Turkey can elaborate on its call for NATO to address their claimed terrorist threats. Currently, every Turkish action is framed as part of the "War on Terrorism", and the fact that other countries have followed Turkey in listing the PKK as a terrorist organisation is always brought up to give Turkish aggression legitimacy. Although many may argue that conceding to Turkish demands is only pragmatic politics, every concession can lead to further demands, and to greater oppression: and Turkey's appeasers are complicit. However, a growing number of people are recognising that in order to break this spiral of violence and curtail Turkish aggression the PKK needs to be removed from international terrorism lists. Instead of penalising resistance, they want to encourage peaceful negotiations that address the problems that brought people to turn to armed resistance as their only option.

The listing of the PKK by the Council of the European Union is currently being challenged in the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg. There was another hearing this week, but a ruling is not expected for some time.

Ultimately, the decision to label an organisation as “terrorists” is a political one, and state definitions of terrorism are very different to popular understandings of the term, which associate it with violent acts against civilians. For states, the crucial issue is the protection of state power. Strengthened anti-terrorism legislation that will come into force in Sweden this summer (and whose development predates their NATO application) will ensure that “all intentional crimes can now be counted as terrorist crimes, provided that they can harm a country or an intergovernmental organization”.

Turkish state terrorism

Terrorist crimes do not have to involve any element of terror, while the many acts of terror carried out by governments are not recognised by official definitions of terrorism – a curious inversion of the original use of the term to apply to Robespierre’s “Reign of Terror” that followed the French Revolution. But in popular perception, state terrorism is only too real, and in few places is this more true than in Turkey, where terror, and repression more generally, has been widely used by successive governments, and has become the main tool of Erdoğan’s rule.

Every week, opposition activists and politicians are rounded up and detained. On Wednesday twenty people were taken into custody in Mersin.

The violence of the village raids that take place frequently in the Kurdish region was exposed on social media on Monday, with a video that showed the arrest of an individual in a village in Van. Military units are seen firing into the air, and women who protested are beaten.

The deliberate destruction of the judiciary was highlighted by the case of the 1992 assassination of Kurdish writer Musa Anter. Long delays mean that the case will likely have to be dropped due to reaching the statute of limitations.

The expression of Kurdish culture is treated as subversive, and a university has now opened a formal investigation into three students who danced a Kurdish dance. The dance has been described as a “provocative action”.

On Tuesday, journalists were out in force in Istanbul to protest against the Disinformation Bill. This is destined to bring in prison sentences of up to three years for those found guilty of spreading anything deemed to be “disinformation”, and has been widely recognised as a massive attack on the freedom of speech.

İmralı

In the view of the Kurdish freedom movement, the epicentre of Turkish state terror is İmralı, the prison Island where Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan, has been held in almost complete isolation for over 23 years. The inhumanity shown by the Turkish state towards Öcalan is felt as an infliction on all Kurds –practically, politically, and psychologically – and also serves as a template for hardening prison practices more broadly. Every day for the last ten years, a group of Kurds has kept vigil outside the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. They call on the Council to use its powers as Europe’s guardian of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, to put pressure on Turkey. They argue that every stage of Öcalan’s incarceration has broken international law: his abduction from Kenya by the CIA and MOSAD; his trial, which was ruled unfair by the Council’s own European Court of Human Rights; his sentence of life without parole, which is deemed to deny him the right of hope; and the, now almost complete, refusal to let him meet with his family or with his lawyers. The men and women in the vigil, Kurds and their friends from different parts of Europe who change over every week, call on the Council’s institutions to end their passivity and delays, and to fulfil their purported role with strength and determination.

The tenth anniversary provided an opportunity to remind people why the vigil is there, both by bringing discussion into the Council building through a fringe meeting, and by bringing Parliamentary Assembly delegates – all MPs from

different European countries – out to the vigil to show their support. The politicians spoke from the heart about the importance of Abdullah Öcalan for all of us as well as for the Kurdish struggle. They provided welcome evidence that there are voices within the institutions speaking out for the rights those institutions are meant to defend – but we also know that they were only a small fraction of the delegates attending the Assembly, and that getting movement from council decision makers will be a long hard process.

Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her website and follow her on Twitter